RELIEF WORK FOR THOSE AFFECTED BY COMMUNAL RIOTS IN GUJARAT, INDIA

A Report

The recent communal riots and carnage in Gujarat, the State where Mahatma Gandhi, the Apostle of Non-Violence, was born, shook everyone. Even after a month the situation never changed, rather the intensity and extension of the riots continued to haunt the State. Various NGOs and Governmental organizations like Minority Commission and National Human Rights Commission etc. visited Gujarat to assess the situation and to plan appropriate action.

On 1 April 2002, a multi-religious *Sadbhavana Tirthayatra* (Goodwill Pilgrimage) comprising various religious and social heads left Delhi by train on a peace mission to Gujarat. Among the prominent leaders in a group of about 45 people from Delhi were Ms. Nirmala Deshpande; Swami Agnivesh; Rev. Valson Thampu, a Jain Muni; three Budhhist monks; several Muslim leaders of Jamait-e-Islami Hind; John Dayal, Shamsul Islam of Nishant theatre group and others. From the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI), Fr. Dominic Emmanuel svd, and Fr. Alex Vadakumthala of the CBCI Commission for Health also joined the group.

One of the first places that the group visited was a Muslim camp in Godhra where nearly 4000 people were found living at a school in rather pathetic conditions.

Hearing stories from the victims some of the group members were literally in tears. It was unbelievable to hear that some Hindu fundamentalists had raped young Muslim girls, chopped off their breasts; slit open their wombs before taking out embryos from the womb and killing those children by piercing *Trishuls* (Tridents) and waving them on swords and *Trishuls*. Women and children reporting to the group were all inconsolable and in uninterrupted tears. The camp site was stinking as the school could hardly hold such a big number of people. The group spent more than an hour before proceeding to the railway yard to see the ill-fated railway bogie S-6 which was set aflame at Godhara on 27th February and in which 59 people died. The burnt bogie was another terrible site.

From Godhara, the group proceeded to Vadodra. On the way to Vadodra, we also visited a large village called Dalol from where nearly 40 Muslim families had to vacate. Their homes were lying locked. Towards the end of the half hour tour the group was confronted with a rather angry group of young boys and men who seemed to mock the group's message of peace. The youth of the predominantly Hindu village appeared triumphant and still carrying revengeful feelings against the Muslims. They gave an impression that they were wronged by Muslims first and what they did was only retaliation to the first act by the Muslims. Though some group members tried to speak to them, they were in no mood to listen to anyone.

From there the group proceeded to Vadodra where a meeting at Patel Bhawan was arranged with other NGOs and media persons of the town. Bishop Godfrey de Rozario of

Baroda too joined the meeting which went on foot to a nearby square popularly known as Mahatma Gandhi Griha and stayed with the group till it left for Ahemdabad. While Swami Agnivesh, Ms. Nirmala Deshpande and Mr. John Dayal made speeches at the square, the Nishant group sang songs.

At 6.45 p.m. on 2 April the group moved on to Ahemdabad by the two buses and reached at Ishwar Bhuwan, a guest house rather late at night. After a night's rest, in the morning the group had an evaluation meeting of the tour until then. At this point, Mr. Udit Raj of the All India Confederation of SC/ST also joined the group and expressed the view that Dalits had been and continued to be used by higher caste Hindus for attacks on Muslims. This was bad and must be stopped. There were dissenting voices within the group about our modus operandi. This was also expected, as there were people of differing opinions, views and background in the group.

After the meeting on 3rd April around 10.00 a.m., the group left by buses to another Muslim camp at Juhapura in Ahemdabad which is basically a large Muslim settlement. The stories at this camp were equally pathetic. People at this camp appeared more angry and frustrated. At this camp again there were speeches by different leaders including Mr. Udit Raj.

Somehow, as the visit to the camp was drawing to an end, the mob around Juhapura got unruly and began to throw stones at one of the buses. The said bus then sped away to safety. This incident shocked the whole group and we returned to Ishwar Bhuwan. At Ishwar Bhuwan we also translated the photocopied one A4 sheet write-up in Gujarati which was poisonous material against the Muslim minority. The next day we collected even more such material from Fr. Cedric Prakash's office. It is also worthwhile mentioning here that most of the Gujarati newspapers were making vitriolic anti-Muslim reports, justifying what was going on in Gujarat.

From Ishwar Bhuwan, about six of us went to another camp which was a camp of Hindu victims at Kankaria, block 7 & 8. This camp was being spruced up for the Prime Minister's visit the next day. The condition at this camp appeared rather artificial and there was no comparison between the affected people at this camp and the other two camps that had been visited earlier. People at this camp looked rather happy and had neither any serious complaints nor any threat from anyone. The government officers were working seriously preparing ration cards for them while the PM's security guards were making security surveys ahead of his visit to the camp scheduled for the next day.

After this visit, we proceeded straight to Sabarmati Gandhi Ashram where the rest of the group was supposed to arrive by the two buses. After lunch at Gandhi Ashram, Sabarmati, there was a meeting of the group with other NGO's and the media working in Ahemdabad. Various leaders and Chiefs of the NGOs spoke about the terrible condition which still existed in Gujarat and especially in Ahemdabad. This further shocked the group present there.

4th of April was the last day of the group in Ahemdabad. Since tensions were still continuing in Gujarat, the group was advised to stay at the Gandhi Ashram and not go to any other camp for visits.

Frs. Dominic and Alex had stayed at Premal Jyoti, the Jesuit theologate. The next morning, we contacted Bishop Stanley Fernandez of Ahemdabad who at that time was on one of his pastoral visits at Nadiad. We could not meet him but he asked us to go to the hospital and convent at Gomtipur in Ahemdabad which was undergoing serious trouble. We were fortunate to be picked up by Fr. Cedric Prakash, who is in the forefront of rehabilitation programmes as well as fighting a legal battle against the police and the government for the rights of the minorities.

Fr. Prakash first took us to his well established office from where he does mainly the advocacy work with other NGOs and where we also met the retired Justice Ravani who is helping him in filing petitions etc. in the court. Fr. Prakash then drove us through some of the most riot affected areas of Ahemdabad such as Kalupur, Sarnagpur, Gomtipur, Sindhi colony and so on where to our utter dismay, except some policemen and cattle, one could find, not a single soul on the road. We were stopped several times on the road by police as curfew was being observed very strictly in these areas. These are all predominantly Muslim areas.

We visited the convent of Missionary Dominican Sisters of Rosary, Rajpur-Gomtipur, where on the previous night more than eight thousand people had gathered and were sent back to their homes in the morning. When we arrived there at 11.30 a.m. there were more than 150 people, with their luggage to leave Ahemdabad for their own villages in Uttar Pradesh. Sisters of the hospital explained to us the terrible situation of the victims. It is not easy to put in words what we witnessed there. We then had lunch with sisters and after going through a few more affected areas we returned with Fr. Prakash to the Gandhi Ashram at Sabarmati and by 4.00 p.m. we left the Ashram for the railway station to come to Delhi. We arrived at Delhi on 5th April.

Swami Agnivesh, Ms. Nirmala Deshpande, Mr. Ehzaz Aslam of the Jamate Islami Hind and Fr. Dominic Emmanuel svd of the CBCI had a joint Press Conference at Swami Agnivesh's residence on Saturday 6th April 2002 to press upon the demand to dismiss the Modi Government in the State and to impose President's Rule there.

The group also wrote a letter to the Prime Minister and another similar one to the President expressing the concern of the group.

MEETING OF VOLUNTEERS AND SESSION ON TRAUMA COUNSELLING

The victims of the brutal violence were found to be under terrible trauma and shock. We also noticed that those in the relief camps were not getting sufficient medical assistance. The first camp that we visited in Godhra, where the population was nearly 4000, had only two doctors on duty. In Juhupura occasionally a medical team used to visit and distribute

medicines. In Gomtipur, though the Dominican Sisters had a small hospital, hardly anyone could go there because of constant threats from the majority community. Due to the growing communal hatred and animosity, many were reluctant and did not feel confident to approach doctors in the Government Hospital. So, we felt that a medical team with some trained personnel in trauma counseling will be of great help in the relief camps.

Towards this end, with the support of Caritas India, the CBCI Commission for Health decided to organize as an emergency intervention and response, a meeting of volunteers and a training session on trauma counseling for those who will eventually go and help the victims of the communal riots in Gujarat. Therefore, a special programme was held on April 13th at the CBCI Centre, New Delhi. 25 volunteers, mostly doctors, teachers and social workers, participated. After a short prayer led by Sr. Dr. Augusta, Fr. Alex briefly gave an introduction to the programme of the day. Fr. Donald De Souza, the Deputy Secretary General of the CBCI welcomed everyone and appreciated this initiative. Mr. John Dayal shared his experience in Gujarat and expressed his concern in the growing communal violence in different parts of the country. Then, a video film of 25 minutes duration on the sad faces of the communal carnage in Gujarat was shown. Rev. Dr. P.O. Jose, who holds a doctorate in trauma counseling, then conducted the session of the theoretical and practical aspects of trauma counseling. Sufficient material on the topic and a report entitled "Gujarat Carnage 2002" prepared by an independent fact finding team, was also distributed to the participants.

RELIEF WORK IN THE CAMPS

The first batch of volunteers left Delhi on May 9th. The team consisted of Sister Drs. Augusta, Emmanuel and Leas, social worker Srs. Maggie, Antonia, Remiya, Genevive, Principal Sr. Celinda, Frs. Lourduswamy, Dominic Emmanuel svd and Alex V., all three of the CBCI, though the last three could not be present for the entire duration of stay. The accommodation was arranged in the Diocesan Pastoral Centre. In coordination with the Social Service Department of the Diocese of Ahamadbad the team worked mainly in three camps i.e. Aman Chauk, Sundram Nagar and Juni Medeawali Chawl. The team also visited and talked to victims at Shah Alam and Dariya Khan Ghummat camps, all within Ahemdabad, where there are 105 relief camps at the moment.

The main work of the team was to offer medical and counseling services to the victims, many of whom are still traumatized and very easily breakdown while relating their stories. The more one listens to their stories the more it gets confirmed that there was government and administration complicity in the Ahemdabad carnage.

One of the common experiences of the team was that people were very easy to talk to. They were very keen on sharing their woes and problems with the team members. They would also approach us with great hope that maybe this team might finally bring them the help they desperately needed. Most people said that they have given any number of interviews to people, who come take copious notes but then nothing happens in the end.

This along with other complaints that we heard clearly indicated that not much substantial help from the government was really coming.

Scenes at the Relief Camps

- Sister doctors and social workers found that people had great confidence in them and were very happy to share with them. The team was welcomed with joy amongst them.
- Announcement on Public Service system asking people to do various things including asking children to go to school or directing other chores.
- Women and small girls (aged 6-10) making incense sticks (*agarbattis*) by the thousands. The wages to make 1000 sticks was Rs. 5. If they worked long hours and very hard they would make about 4 to 5 thousand sticks in a day. There were other women who were stitching local mattresses or making paper bags. The wages to make one mattress was Rs. 12 and Rs. 5 for one Kilogram of paper bags. Obviously these are exploitative rates but these were also the going rates during normal times.
- There were also some wounded people who were made invalid because of bullet shots or due to partial burning who could do little or no work at all.
- At the Aman Chauk camp the women who had borne new babies had a separate place within the camp but with no extra better roof or anything. They were separated, probably because of privacy required for breast-feeding.
- Some children looked traumatized, particularly those who were eye-witnesses to the torture of their parents, brothers, sisters or neighbours. We met a 10 year old girl, who according to the people in the camp, had lost her mental balance after the incidents.
- People seemed so keen to give us details about themselves and what happened to them, hoping that they would benefit something from our visit.
- Some were not interested so much in any help but in emphasizing, "You must go and tell exactly what you see to the bosses in Delhi. They should know the truth".
- Some women were still very angry but there were others who would just break down, as they would explain their stories. One of them in tears said, "They asked us to recite praises of Ram, we did that. I told them to take away whatever they wanted but they said that they wanted to kill us and they killed my husband". She also showed us the scar of a sword right in the middle of her skull starting from her forehead.
- Describing the scenes of the genocide, one man said, "Even the devil would be ashamed to witness the acts we witnessed with our own eyes, when girls of ten years and younger were gang raped in front of their parents and then burnt alive.
- People also looked worried and asked as to what was going to happen to them when the monsoons would set in.

Some Major Complaints from the Relief Camps

- Coordinators of camps had many complaints about the apathy of the government towards camps and its residents. For instance, the government was providing the basic items such as wheat flour, rice, lentils, milk powder, oil and sugar. It would then give Rs. 5 each per head which was to meet the cost of firewood, spices, vegetables, tea, biscuits, rent for cooking utensils, payment for the cook and his team etc. Dariya Khan Ghummat camp that we visited on 15th May, for example spent Rs. 3,800/- only to pay the cook and his team of 26 workers daily. It indeed appeared that it was very difficult to manage with what was being provided.

- At the Aman Chauk camp, which already had 42 new births until 15th may (in 75 days), showed us the type of food they were given. Though the food was average, their complaint was about the same food being served everyday. Being used to another type of diet, they certainly missed non-vegetarian portions in the food served.

- The camp coordinators said that they were managing the shortfall in their budget through donations from some prosperous Muslims. They also spoke about their deep trust in Allah who looks after every ones needs.

- There was also shortage of medicines. We were also shown bills of medicines bought from the store because it was not available with doctors visiting the camp.

- One of the biggest complaints of people was the refusal of police to register FIRs with specific names. The police would tell them to register cases of rape, murder or burning in the name of crowds and not in individual's names. They were still uncooperative.

- Even where survey had been made and where people had lost hundreds of thousands worth of goods or houses, they were being handed over cheques of Rs. 1200/- 1500/- or 2000/- only. In Dariya Khan camp we met a widow on the 13th day of her husband's death who reportedly died of an heart attack when the administration was handing him over a cheque of Rs. 2000/- for a shop where 22,000 liters of kerosene and other stuff were all turned to ashes. She has now five children to look after and had nobody to bring the earning in. There were many such cases.

- Another complaint was from the makers of incense sticks (*Agarbattis*). The owners of the factories informed the Muslim workers that they had received orders from some Hindu organizations that they were not to employ Muslims in their factories. This was told to us by several women in the camps.

- The victims also complained about lack of Muslim officers in the government.

Some Differences

A difference between our last visit to the camps in the beginning of April and this one six weeks later was apparent.

- People looked a little more settled, probably due to passage of time but at the same time they were keen on getting out of camps. Those who had seen the most horrific tortures, rapes and killings vowed never to return to those places. In particular, the Muhammad Ali from Naroda Patiya said, "even if the government gives us Rs. 200,000.00 we will not go back there. We are prepared to spend rest of our lives on barren (literal meaning 'naked') ground, but we will never return to those places. We do not feel safe at all".

- People in Dhariya Khan camp said, "even when we go with government officials for survey and to show them what we have lost, we see Hindus sharpening their swords or waving tridents (*trishul*) at us as if to tell us, "you are not welcome here and that if you do come these instruments will be used against you".

- Some people appeared to be less traumatized and now were waiting for government initiative to give them some place where they could begin their lives again. They invariably preferred to be in Muslim ghettos, for, in times such as these in future they said, "We could at least be together to protect ourselves and in case we die we will get a decent burial rather than being burnt with petrol after our women being raped in front of our own eyes".
- The number of inhabitants in camps has come down, not because they have returned to their villages or homes but because some of them have been taken away by their relatives back to Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Mharashtra or even in other parts of Gujarat where they could be safe. For instance in the Dariya Khan camp there were 7,500 people but by 15th May there were only 4,500 people left.

Urgent Steps Needed to be taken

- Overhauling of the whole government machinery so that people could have confidence in the government
- Government to make serious efforts to provide security so that people can feel confident to go back to their original homes

- Government should take the reports of national Human Rights Commission and independent reports made by some senior retired Justices such as V. R. Krishna Iyer and others.

- Impartial inquiry to be set up for the crimes committed.
- Immediate rebuilding of damaged mosques and shrines.
- Immediate rebuilding of burnt and damaged homes.
- Reimbursing cash and kind for business losses. If the Government does not have money, it should seek assistance from Aid agencies, local or foreign.
- Need for more nutritious food and medicine.

- In view of the forthcoming monsoons, better facilities to be planned for camps as most of them are living in open camps with plastic sheets over their heads, unable to hold heavy rains.
- Provide some occupation to people living in camps and seeing to it that they get jobs when they return to their homes. In Aman Chauk camp where people had some occupation like making incense sticks, mattresses, etc. looked more at peace.
- More counselors and doctors for people suffering in camps.
- Authentic surveys to be made of losses and dispersing of small amounts to be stopped.
- Confidence building measures among various religious communities. Religious leaders must be used for this purpose.

Local Catholic Church's Participation

- Fr. Cedric Prakash has made great impact by his advocacy work being carried out from his center called PRASHANT. His center has organized documenting many of the undocumented details of the Gujarat carnage.
- St. Mary's Nursing Home, run by Dominican nuns at Gomtipur continues to cater to the victims, mostly Muslims.
- Citizens Initiative (comprising 26 NGOs) but initiative taken by St. Xavier's Social Services which has been doing great work providing medicine, foodgrain, bedding; household articles.
- Voluntary help from Premal Jyoti scholastics and students from St. Xavier's College.
- Work being coordinated by the Ahemdabad Social service Centre in various camps including the hosting of Christian teams coming from other parts of India.
- Work organized by Sr. Dr. Alphonsa of Gujarat GVHA as well as of CHAI.

Conclusion

The Team felt satisfied and fulfilled for having had the opportunity to make its services available to the victims. The group also felt that their own faith was strengthened after witnessing the faith of victims in Allah or in Providence. Some felt that they profited more from the trip than the advantage they might have brought to the victims. They looked forward to more such opportunities. We thank profoundly Caritas India for the financial support towards the realization of this humble, yet timely intervention in Gujarat. The saying is indeed true: "it is better to light a candle rather than cursing the darkness!"

Report prepared by Frs. Dominic and Alex

The presence of volunteers gives comfort and relief to the victims of communal violence in Gujarat.

For the people in Aman Chauk, Sundaram Nagar and Juni Medeawali Chawl in Ahmadabad, it was a sigh of relief to see everyday a group of doctors, social workers and sisters coming to them and being with them during the days of their distress and pain. The people in these camps - all of them Muslims - were far away from their villages, most of their houses burnt, possessions lost, and worse still, most of them still under trauma and shock due to the loss of their dear ones and friends in the communal riots. They were all still under constant fear and anxiety, since violence against them could sporadically break out at any time. In the scorching heat, with limited supply of food and water and absolutely inadequate facilities in the camps, the visit of these volunteers was a gesture of great relief and comfort.

With the support of Caritas India, the CBCI Commission for Healthcare organized a team of medical doctors and social workers from Delhi and carried out the relief work in collaboration with the Social Service department of the Diocese of Ahmedabad. At an earlier visit to Gujarat with a multi-religious team from Delhi, *Sadbhavana Tirthayatra*, it was identified that the immediate needs in the camps were medical aid and trauma counseling. The Health Commission then organized a Trauma Counseling Session at the CBCI Centre, Delhi on April 13, 2002. Rev. Dr. P.O. Jose, sdb, who holds a doctorate in trauma counseling, conducted a programme on the theoretical and practical aspects of trauma counseling of the victims of riot. A video film of 25 minutes duration on the sad faces of the communal carnage in Gujarat was shown. Sufficient material on the topic and a report entitled "Gujarat Carnage 2002" prepared by an independent fact finding team, was also distributed to the participants. Thus the preparation helped their work and involvement with the people in the relief camps.

The team of volunteers left Delhi on May 9^{h}. The team consisted of Sister Doctors Augusta, Emmanuel and Leas, social worker Srs. Maggie, Antonia, Remiya, Genevive, Principal Sr. Celinda, Frs. Lourduswamy, Dominic Emmanuel svd and Alex Vadakumthala all three of the CBCI, though the last three could not be present for the entire duration of stay. The accommodation was arranged in the Diocesan Pastoral Centre. The team worked mainly in three camps i.e. Aman Chauk, Sundram Nagar and Juni Medeawali Chawl. The team also visited and talked to victims at Shah Alam and Dariya Khan Ghummat camps, all within Ahemdabad, where there were 105 relief camps at that time.

The main work of the team was to offer medical and counseling services to the victims, many of who are still traumatized and very easily breakdown while relating their stories. The more one listens to their stories the more one could realize the organized brutal atrocity on a minority community.

One of the common experiences of the team was that people were very easy to talk to. They were very keen on sharing their woes and problems with the team members. There was a sense of satisfaction for all the members of the team for having had the opportunity to make its services available to the victims. The group also felt that their own faith was strengthened after witnessing the faith of victims in Allah or in Providence. Some felt that they profited more from the trip than the advantage they might have brought to the victims. True indeed that it is "better to light a candle rather than cursing the darkness!"